

A DASHING DRAGOON
THE MURAT OF THE AMERICAN ARMY

BY CAPTAIN MAYNE REID

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THERE is a name among the military heroes of America not so often spoken as it should be; but which, when spoken, never fails to strike upon the ear with an interest almost romantic. In it the soldier recognizes the ring of the true metal; and its mention calls up the image of as fine a dragoon officer as ever drew sabre or set foot in a stirrup.

This officer was Philip Kearny.

Was!! How sad an old comrade feels in penning the past tense! Would I could say *is!*

Alas! it cannot be. His life-blood, of which he was so daringly regardless, has fertilized the sod of Chantilly; his ashes rest in the tomb of his ancestors; and his heroic soul has passed to a more peaceful world. But for that fatal shot that made him a corpse in the saddle, his name would now have been louder upon the lips of his countrymen. For the man who cried "Cowardice or treason!" when Malvern Hill was so basely abandoned to the foe, would have led to victory had he lived; and this man was General Philip Kearny.

To say this is no disparagement to the successful leaders who survived him. I don't think there is one among them will deny that had Phil Kearny not met premature death, he would have achieved rank second to none, as second to none has he won reputation. And it is a reputation that will, year after year, and day after day grow brighter; as under the calm retrospect of peace, his deeds of warlike daring—of high chivalric heroism—become better known.

It is not my purpose to write the biography of General Philip

—(From "Onward" January, 1869, vol. I, p. 25.)

Kearny. There are other pens better fitted for the task; and some of them will no doubt perform this national duty. It should be a labor of love for any patriot to write the story of such a life; and here is no patriot who should not read it. I am incapable; for while Kearny was engaged in that grand struggle, that gave the latest proof, alike of his gallantry as devotion to his country's cause, I was far away in a distant quarter of the globe.

In the lesser strife, that by something more than a decade preceded it—the second conquest of Mexico,—I was by his side, and saw him do a deed that fixed him in my mind forever after as a “dashing dragoon.”

It is of this deed, too little known, I desire to make record; so that it may assist the future biographer of the gallant Kearny, as also the historian of that spirited Mexican expedition—still but feebly chronicled. Partly for these reasons, and partly that the eye-witnesses of those far-distant events—in their day thought stirring, and still picturesque—are gradually growing less in number.¹

Alas, that from among us Phil Kearny is missing! But his memory is with us; and now for a chapter that will not only recall him to the thoughts of his old comrades, but his countrymen, in all the dash, the daring, the unparalleled picturesqueness of his character.

It was the battlefield, known in history as *Churubusco*; so called from a stream of the name, with a village upon its banks—a cluster of huts and churches, with a grand convent rising massively in their midst. It is on the famed National Road, leading south towards Acapulco from the City of Mexico, and about five miles from the suburb of the latter city—the *garita* of San Antonio de Abad.

The crossing of the stream was defended by a battery on the

¹ The singular manner of Phil. Kearny's death is not generally known; but to describe it is a task too painful for a friend.

tête du pont, by flanking works along the banks on both sides and by a strong body of troops that occupied the convent of Churubusco, for the time transformed into a fortress.

It cost the American army a deadly struggle to take these works; all the deadlier that they were defended by two hundred brave Irishmen, who, as is too often the case, were fighting on the wrong side. They were deserters, and fought in despair—with the prospect of a halter if taken.² The *tête du pont*, although desperately defended, was at length carried; the sooner that a brigade of gallant volunteers, sent round by the left flank, pressed the enemy at the Hacienda Los Portales. But for this, it is a question whether Churubusco would have been carried so soon.

This brigade, sent as above-mentioned to the left, on its own side, had enough work to do. It consisted of the New York and South Carolina regiments.

As we stood side by side that day, our flags swayed by the same breeze, our muzzles pointed in the same direction, who could have thought that those standards should ever be seen in opposing ranks, or those bayonets ever clash in the conflict of internecine strife? Surely not one of *us*.

No! we had enough to think of without that, as our men fell, side by side, or one upon the other, mingling their life-blood together—the best of the North, as of the South.

And both flowed equally as freely! In those days men used to talk of Waterloo and its terrible carnage. Man for man, there was more blood spilled at Churubusco. The writer of this sketch was in command of sixty volunteer soldiers. When the action was over, he counted thirty-two of them lying on the grass, nearly a dozen of them dead! After this it was not necessary to say they were brave. And it needed all their courage to carry the defences of Los Portales.

² They were taken, and fifty of them hanged in one morning—the morning on which Chapultepec was stormed. Twenty-eight were hanged at one place. Simultaneously, and by tap of drum, were they launched into eternity. It was a terrible retribution, but could not well be avoided. On that day the fate of the American army hung suspended as on a thread; and the example was one of stern necessity.

There was a time when they wavered. What troops would not have done so under a shower of leaden hail that, in addition to half their numbers, laid low nearly every field-officer in the brigade? It would have been no cowardice had they at that time retreated.

But they did not. A young officer, belonging to the New York regiment,³ sprang forth, and called upon them to follow him to the charge. The Irish drummer, Murphy, dashed out after; gave a soul-stirring tap to his drum, and, as if keeping time to its quick rolling, Empires and Palmettos rushed forward at bayonet charge.

The coming of the cold steel was a warning to the Mexican troops. A squadron of their cavalry, threatening a charge on our left, wheeled their horses quick about, and went off on a hand gallop for the city; while the foot defenders of Los Portales and the causeway of the Acapulco road flung down their discharged *escopettes*, and scattered off through swamp and chaparral. Still led by the New York officer, the remnants of the half-slaughtered brigade plunged breast-deep into the slimy *zanca*, clambered up the causeway, and continued the pursuit along the level road

Exhausted by the long-continued struggle, saturated with water from sole to waist, laden with sink-mud, they made but slow progress.

But at that moment there appeared, coming along the causeway, a troop going quicker, that promised to take the pursuit off their hands. It was a troop (a squadron) of horsemen, with horses of all light iron gray color.⁴

Emerging from the smoke-cloud of Churubusco, they looked like a band of angels with Gabriel at their head! It was Kearny with his squadron of cavalry. Before the fatigued foot had time to congratulate themselves on the relief, the dragoons came sweeping past. They were going at full gallop in half sections of twos, the men with sloped sabres, the horses with snorting nostrils, each

³ Mayne Reid, the writer himself.

⁴ Kearny took great pride in his dragoons, and had their horses *in uniform*—a beautiful dapple gray. This had been effected, at considerable expense to himself, by exchanging the regulation horse for a handsomer and better.

buried in the spread tail of that preceding him; the hoofs of all striking simultaneously on the firm crown of the causeway, as if they were galloping to set music!

At their head rode a man of slight stature, with light-colored hair, and a complexion to correspond. A long tawny moustache became the classical type of face, and somewhat aquiline nose that surmounted it. They were features belonging to a natural-born commander, and looked in their place at the head of a charging troop. They were the features of Phil Kearny.

The young New York officer, recognizing them as those of his gallant friend, cried out to his tired comrades: "Now, boys; three cheers for Phil Kearny! You've still breath enough for that?" The shout that responded showed he had not mistaken their strength. Most of them were New Yorkers, and knew that Kearny was of their kind.

The dragoons had scarce passed when an aide-de-camp rode up, bearing a message from the Commander-in-Chief. It was an order *to stay the pursuit!* It was given to a lieutenant-colonel, the only field officer upon the ground. The order came upon the men like a bomb-shell, projected from the rear. Stop the pursuit! What did it mean? They had put the enemy to flight; and they knew he would not again make stand to oppose them that side the city—nor even in the city; for the scare upon his scattered troops would be sure to carry them clear through it, especially when chased by Kearny. Stop the pursuit! What could it mean? The lieutenant-colonel could not tell. He could only beg of them to obey. They laughed at him, for he had not led them; and only looked to the lieutenant who had. The latter listened to the order from the aide-de-camp, for it was at length directed to him, as the only one who had the power to enforce obedience to it. "'Tis a fatal mistake, said he," "and General Scott will find it out in time. We have the city in our power; and it will cost more blood to get it so again." "The orders are for you to halt!" shouted the aide-de-camp, who, accompanied by a cavalry bugler, galloped on after the

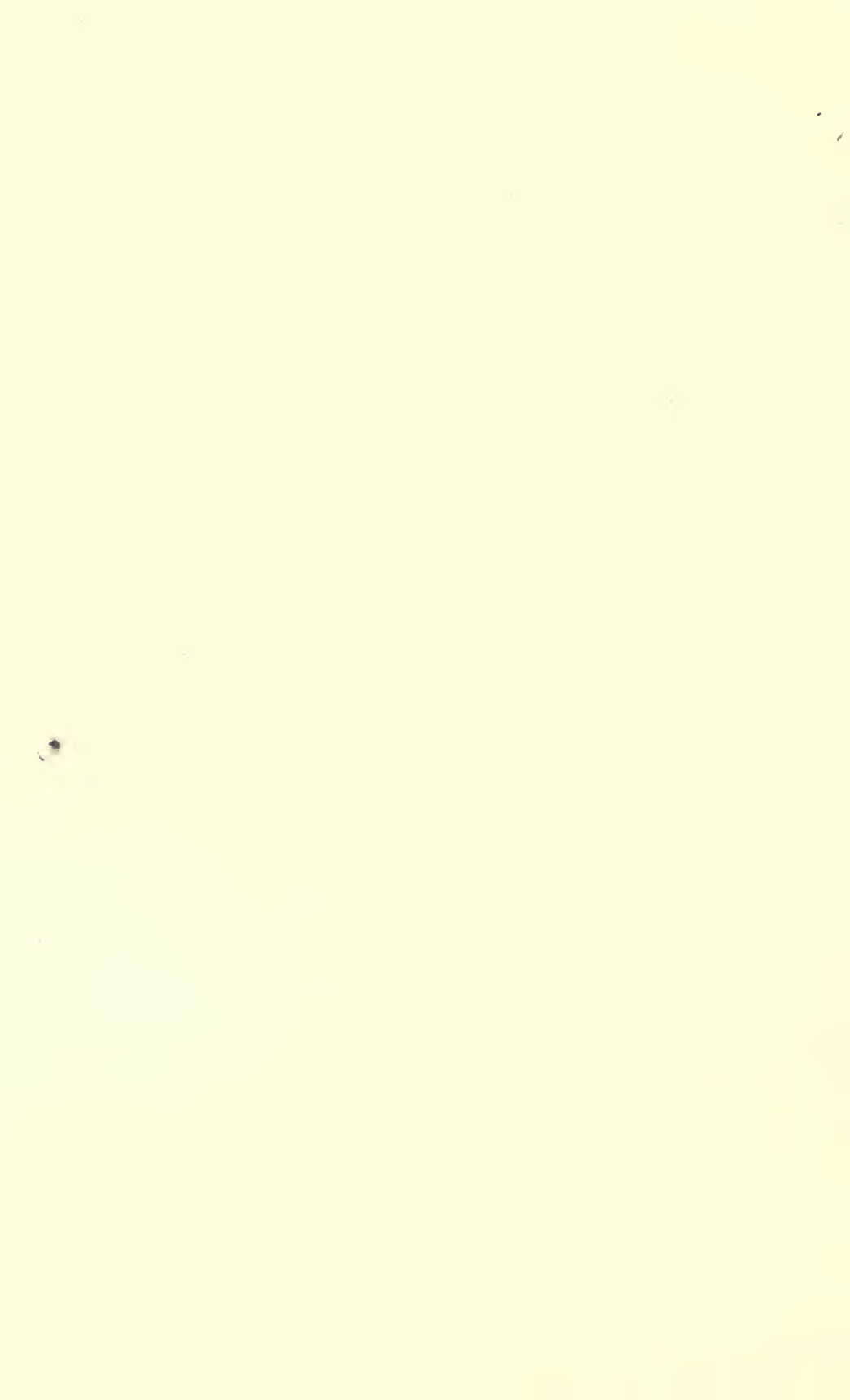
dragoons. "Halt!" cried the New York lieutenant, flinging himself in front of the pursuers, and raising his sword with an air of determination. It was a command that came only from a sense of military duty, and the word faltered upon his lips, as he pronounced it. "Halt did yez say, liftinant?" "Halt!" repeated the officer, in a firmer tone. "If *you* say halt, begorra, we'll do it; but not for any other officer in the American army!" With the sword held at point, the lieutenant stood determinedly pointing them; and the men came reluctantly to a stand. They had scarce done so, when a spectacle commenced passing before their eyes that made every man of them sad—almost mad. Back along the road came riding the squadron (troop) of Kearny, not as they had passed before, at full gallop, in the flush of a vigorous charge; but slow and dejected as if returning from a reverse. And in the rear rode their leader, his left arm no longer grasping the reins, but hanging by his side, like the sling jacket of a hussar!

The tale was soon told. Some half-mile beyond the spot where the aide-de-camp halted us, the enemy had cut the Acapulco road and thrown a parapet across it, with the usual fosse outside. Here a few of their bravest men had determined on making a last stand. But Kearny, braver than they, riding at wild gallop, had leaped his horse into the work—with one spring, clearing both ditch and parapet! His faithful sergeant had followed him; both, as soon as they alighted, plying their sabres upon the enemy inside! At that moment sounded the recall bugle of the orderly accompanying Scott's aide-de-camp; and the American dragoons, trained to the signal, pulled short up outside.

It was a terrible predicament! Alone within the entrenchment surrounded by a score of assailants, Kearny and his sergeant had no other alternative but retreat; and, wheeling right about, both headed their horses to releap the ditch. Their gallant grays carried them across—the sergeant safe; but the best cavalry officer in the American army received a (canister) shot in his left arm that caused him instantaneously to let go his bridle rein. It pained me to see

it hanging loose, as he and his squadron filed past, going back along the Acapulco road. But the cheer that saluted his return was far more sympathetic and not less enthusiastic than that sent after him in his impetuous charge. In the battle of Churubusco, as on other Mexican fields, the writer of this sketch commanded a corps of men—who were a strange conglomeration of veterans and *vieux sabreurs*. They had seen service on almost every European field, as also in Asia and Africa. They had been organized in New York City, under the *ægis* of an old Napoleonic officer—the Count de Bongars. By the incidence of campaign life they came under my command shortly after the battle of Cerro Gordo, and so continued till peace was sealed by the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Among them were many cavalymen, who had been trained in the first schools, and taken part in celebrated charges. One and all confessed to me they had never witnessed a charge so perfect, so compact, so *dashing*, as that led by Phil Kearny along the causeway of San Antonio de Abad. To convince me of this, I did not need their testimony: for I too had seen something of cavalry service—enough to know that, if there be any dispute as to who is the *Murat* of the American army, it must be between two men of similar Christian names—two Philips: in short, between *Kearny* and *Sheridan*.

MAYNE REID.



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